COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE

A Thrilling Story by Mrs. Wilson Woodrow

WALLACE RAMSEY'S acquaintance with Coombs dated from one of the most perilous moments of his career.

Rather proof against any manifestation of "nerves," he yet could never review the circumstances without a sensation of chill running down his spine—the evening rush hour in a subway station; the packed throngs along the platform; the deep rumble of an oncoming express train. As is rounded the curve, he thought of it fancifully as a mighty dragon with great green and yellow eyes emerging thunderously from its black cavern.

There was a sudden surge forward of the crowd about him; an elbow was planted squarely in his back, with a fierce thrust, and he went down headlong, sprawling across the tracks. He heard dully the clamor of confusion above him—hoarse shouts and a woman's shrill, hysterical scream—muffled by the roar of the approaching express. He felt the rush of wind stirred up in advance of the train. But half-stunned, he was still incapable of action.

Then, almost as quickly as he fell, a man, swift and agile as a cat, leaped from the platform and seizing Ramsey under the arms, dragged him into the narrow space between the supporting pillars at the side of the tracks.

The long string of black cars came to a grinding stop, and trainmen swarmed and shouted about them. With the aid of these, Ramsey and his rescuer got back to the platform; and when he had satisfied inquiring officials that he was neither bent on suicide nor claiming any damages, Wallace was glad to get away from the jostling press and to limp up an exit stairway on his companion's arm. Although pretty well shaken and bruised, he had escaped any nasty cuts or sprains, and he drew a grateful breath of relief as they emerged into the electric-spangled animation of the Broadway evening.

"Feel safe now." The man relaxed the steadying hold he had maintained on Ramsey. "Or would you rather have me tag along?" He glanced around a bit warily. "They're not apt to start anything on the street, of course; still——"

"They?" Ramsey questioned sharply.

"Sure, you don't think the shove that sent you off the platform was an accident, do you? I tell you, I saw the fellow's arm go out. I didn't get to see any more of him than that; I went after you. But you can take it from me, some one was trying to bump you off."

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RAMSEY frowned. The assertion unpleasantly strengthened an impression he had gained from two or three recent experiences—nothing so obvious as this, yet close shaves from accident or injury which it was hard to attribute wholly to chance. He had tried to put the suspicion away from him, had refused to consider it seriously; the idea of a vendetta against him seemed so utterly fantastic. But here apparently was a positive and definite confirmation.

Involuntarily he cast a quick look about him as the other man had done, then jerked his head toward a taxi standing at the curb.

"Let's get out of this," he said. "I had an engagement for dinner, but don't feel in the mood to keep it now. And you offered to see me on my way. Suppose, if you've nothing else on hand, that we dine together tonight; then we can talk things over at our leisure. My name is Ramsey, by the way—Wallace Ramsey."

"Mine's Coombs," returned the other. "And 'dine' sounds good to me."

He gave an appraising glance at Ramsey as he spoke, taking in the latter's general air of prosperity and well-being, which only money in the pockets and the certainty of more to draw on if needed can bestow; then he followed the other to the waiting cab and helped him aboard.

Inside the taxi Ramsey leaned back a little dizzily against the cushions and closed his eyes; he still felt the shock of his recent experience, and the revelation connected with it naturally did not add to his peace of mind.

Only once did he break silence during their short drive of five or six blocks, and then it was to voice an inquiry regarding his assailant.

"You say you only saw the man's arm?" he probed. "But you could tell something from that, couldn't you? Was he young or old? Well or roughly dressed? Would you," with a suggestion of eagerness, "describe him as a professional man—a lawyer, perhaps?"

Coombs shook his head.

"I couldn't answer, not if I was under oath. You see," apologetically, "it was all over so quick, just like a flash; and my mind was more on saving you than taking notice of him."

"Of course," Ramsey agreed gratefully; "and small chance of a quarrel between us on that score. It's due entirely to your presence of mind and pluck that I'm sitting here alive and whole, and don't think that I forget it. I can't thank you—not in words.

"It was only," he reverted, "that I thought you might have caught some sort of snapshot impression of the man that would aid us as a clue in fixing his identity."

"No." Coombs again shook his head. "It might have been a lawyer; it might have been a longshoreman. For all I can say, it might have been a Chink or an Indian in full war paint. I'd like to help you, Mr. Ramsey, but honestly I can't."

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THE subject was dropped, and a moment or two later they drew up before the place to which Ramsey had directed the chauffeur, a restaurant not too smart, but where the food was excellent, and they could talk without the interruption of music.

By this time Ramsey had recovered sufficiently to take a less absorbing interest in his own sensations and to feel some stirrings of curiosity in regard to the man who had so intrepidly risked his life to save that of a stranger. After he had led the way to a small table in a secluded alcove and had ordered a substantial dinner—Coombs' tastes, he found, were most catholic; anything suited him that could be served quickly—he tried to appraise his new acquaintance without appearing to make too close a scrutiny.

He had already been struck by a sort of indefinable resemblance in the man to himself, but now he came to the conclusion that it lay more in outline than in feature. They were of about the same height and build, and the shape of the head and face was similar, but there the likeness ended. Ramsey was dark, but Coombs was swarthy. Ramsey's eyes were steady and contemplative; Coombs' were quick and glancing, roaming everywhere and seeing everything.

He was a thoroughly urban specimen, conveying the impression, somehow, that he knew more of cities, especially on their seamy side, than of the open country. His was the cosmopolitanism of the born rover, with a ready adaptability to whatever circumstances came his way. His clothes, although well-made, were shabby; his boots were broken, and there as a yellowish pallor on his face and a sinking in of the cheeks which suggested that he had known a recent season of rigorous fasting, a fact which was further attested by the famished way in which he fell upon his food when it was brought.

Ramsey noticed, though, after the soup was finished and a thick, juicy steak which followed had been served, that Coombs winced in attempting to manipulate his portion, and transferred his knife from his right hand to his left.

"Twisted my elbow a bit back there in the subway," he explained in response to the other's inquiring glance, but scoffed when Ramsey urged him to see a doctor. "It's nothing," he demurred; "get well by itself in no time. About all the difference it makes is to convert me into a 'southpaw' for a few days."

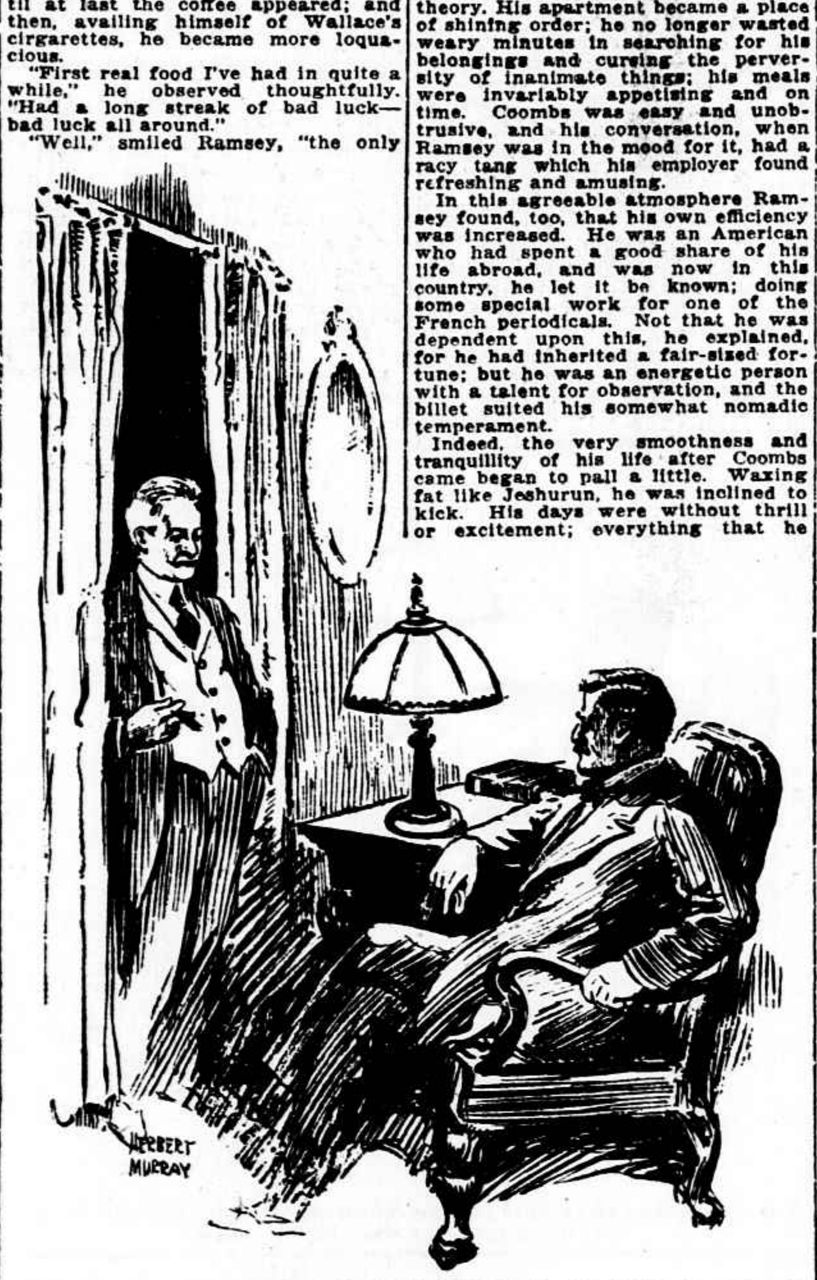
And really it was remarkable to see how adroitly he handled both knife and fork with only the single hand.

"Why, you're ambidextrous!" exclaimed Ramsey.

Coombs nodded indifferently. Indeed, his mouth was too full to do much more, and evidently he regarded it as better employed than a discussion either of his disabilities or his talents. The meal consequently progressed almost entirely in silence, until at last the coffee appeared; and then, availing himself of Wallace's cirgarettes, he became more loquacious.

"First real food I've had in quite a while," he observed thoughtfully. "Had a long streak of bad luck—bad luck all around."

"Well," smiled Ramsey, "the only sure thing about luck, they say, is that it is bound to change. Perhaps I can help turn the tide."



FOR AN IMPERCEPTIBLE MOMENT HE PAUSED, SURVEYING RAMSEY, WHO SAT IN THE STRONGER LIGHT.

The man seemed to consider, twisting his cigarette about in his slim fingers.

"I don't want to be paid for pulling you off those tracks," he scrupled. "That was nothing much. But I'm up against it, no denying that, Mr. Ramsey; and I would like a job around New York here for a while. Have you a valet?"

A valet! That explained his cosmopolitanism, the near-gentleman air of him, but yet not wholly. Ramsey rather prided himself on his ability to guess a man's calling at a glance, but so far he had been quite unable to classify Coombs; even the trade of valeting fitted him only sketchily.

"I don't know." Wallace looked dubious. "I've scraped along without one so far. You see, although I'm living now in a bachelar apartment, I travel a good deal, and I've learned to do pretty well for myself. To tell the truth, I'm afraid you wouldn't find enough to occupy you."

"I think I could make myself useful," urged Coombs. "I'm a pretty good cook, too—nothing fancy, you know; but I could please you, I'm sure. I could also," with that half-impudent cock of his eyes, "wear any half-worn clothes you have. We're near enough of a size to be twins."

"I've noticed that, too," said Ramsey. "Well, if you want to come with me I'll not say no; I've been getting pretty bad service all around. When do you want to start?"

"Now," replied Coombs promptly. "Nowhere else to go; I was planning on a night up in Van Cortland Park when I ran into you. And I'm carrying everything I've got on my back."

Ramsey was surprised. He had not imagined it was anywhere near so bad as that with his companion. But Coombs only laughed at his expressions of solicitude. He had evidently been in tighter corners.

"You'll come with me tonight, anyhow," said Ramsey decisively. "Then you can leave or stay, as you please. My life may be worthless enough to others, but it's distinctly valuable to me; and since you've saved it, I want you to let me——"

He reached for his bill-fold, but Coombs stretched a deprecating hand across the table.

"No need of that, Mr. Ramsey," he protested. "If you gave me money," twitching his nose whimsically, "it would be just a roundabout way of presenting it to a lot of poker sharks and handbook men. I'd rather keep fit, and earn it. I want to keep fit." His face became serious, even dark for a moment. "And really I'm not a bad valet; I can pull all that, 'Beg pardon, sir,' and 'Do you wish your morning coat?' stuff all right, if I have to."

"Besides," he added as a clinching argument, significantly lowering his voice, "you oughtn't to be alone, sir. Whoever was responsible for that business tonight isn't going to rest satisfied with a failure. They'll be trying it again, and you might find it very convenient to have some one close at hand."

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WALLACE started. Diverted by Coombs' chatter, that ominous phase of his late adventure had temporarily slipped his mind. Nor could he dismiss it as a mere bugaboo, a trumped-up or imaginary danger. The more he reflected upon the chain of events which had culminated in that evening's attack, the more he was convinced that he was the object of a directed and deliberate hostility.

After all, it would be rather comfortable to have within call a fellow so alert and resourceful as Coombs had shown himself.

So the bargain was concluded, and in their new relationship of master and man the two betook themselves to Ramsey's flat with a feeling of mutual satisfaction.

But the next morning when he awoke Wallace began to question what he had let himself in for. He had taken under his roof a fellow of whom he knew nothing, and who, although he talked a good deal and on all manner of subjects, vouchsafed precious little information regarding himself—a vagabond certainly; perhaps a thief, a drunkard, or a fugitive from justice. It would have been more the part of common sense to have paid the man a reward and have ended the matter then and there.

He could hear Coombs stirring about in the kitchen, and called to him with a half notion to rescind the arrangement they had entered into. Almost immediately Coombs appeared, carrying a perfectly appointed breakfast tray.

"I rather thought you wouldn't feel like getting up this morning, sir, after that jolt you had last night; so I had everything ready for you," he explained as he busied himself in raising the shades and wheeling the tea table up to Ramsey's bedside.

Insensibly, Ramsey found his doubts and ill-humor vanishing under the influence of these cheerful, capable ministrations. The food, too, when he came to taste of it, was delicious, a change indeed from the soggy, half-congealed breakfasts he had been in the custom of having sent up to him from the restaurant below. It began to seem as if instead of the incubus he had feared he was harboring an angel unawares.

And as time went on he inclined more and more to the angel-unawares theory. His apartment became a place of shining order; he no longer wasted weary minutes in searching for his belongings and cursing the perversity of inanimate things; his meals were invariably appetising and on time. Coombs was easy and unobtrusive, and his conversation, when Ramsey was in the mood for it, had a racy tang which his employer found refreshing and amusing.

In this agreeable atmosphere Ramsey found, too, that his own efficiency was increased. He was an American who had spent a good share of his life abroad, and was now in this country, he let it be known; doing some special work for one of the French periodicals. Not that he was dependent upon this, he explained, for he had inherited a fair-sized fortune; but he was an energetic person with a talent for observation, and the billet suited his somewhat nomadic temperament.

Indeed, the very smoothness and tranquillity of his life after Coombs came began to pall a little. Waxing fat like Jeshurun, he was inclined to kick. His days were without thrill or excitement; everything that he needed was always at his hand; all his wants were anticipated and provided for. Even that sinister happening in the subway faded as a hint of impending menace. The weeks passed, and there was no further circumstance which could, even by conjecture, be twisted into a move against him. There were times when Wallace questioned pretty strongly whether Coombs, in spite of his positive assertion, might not have been mistaken, or might not for his own advantage have exaggerated the actual facts. * * *

And then one day something occurred which suddenly broke the even tenor of existence, and had a far-reaching effect upon the lives of both Ramsey and his valet.

It started with a letter which Ramsay received at breakfast time, and which seemed to exert a peculiarly perturbing influence upon him. He rose abruptly from the table on reading it, although his meal was scarcely half finished, and passed at once into his study. Not to work, however, although the morning was the time he usually spent at his desk. Coombs could hear him inside, pacing up and down the floor and moving restlessly about.

Precisely at 12 o'clock he closed the door of communication between his study and the rest of the apartment, another unusual thing for him to do, and shortly thereafter answered a telephone call, speaking in so guarded a tone that what he said would have been quite indistinguishable six feet from the instrument.

After this he was more like himself, but still showed a sort of preoccupied excitement, and started up as on an impulse in the middle of luncheon to hurry away to his bank.

Returning a half-hour or so later, he spent the rest of the afternoon fidgeting uneasily about the apartment until 5 o'clock, when, as if unable to stand the inaction any longer, he seized his hat and stick and went out, telling Coombs that he was going for a long walk and would not be back for dinner.

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AT a quarter after 6 he was swinging around a corner into one of the cross streets of the upper West Side, his quick, nervous stride undiminished, when his foot encountered a banana peel dropped by some careless urchin, and he went down with a crash to the sidewalk. A sharp, sickening pain at the knee half numbed him for a moment, and as he struggled to arise the agony became so intense that he slumped back, white-lipped and impotent.

Then a strong arm was thrown around him as a support, and he heard a familiar voice making solicitous inquiries. Even his suffering gave way for a minute to incredulous amazement.

"Coombs!" he gasped. "How did you happen to be here?"

"Oh, I often follow you about," confessed the valet. "You're so reckless, Mr. Ramsey. And I've never been able to get over the sight of that fellow pushing you into the subway. But tell me," he interrupted himself, "are you badly hurt, sir?"

"It's my knee," Ramsey groaned. A crowd had collected by this time, and with the aid of one or two husky fellows he was lifted to his feet. "I don't believe I can stand on it." He relaxed weakly in the grasp of his supporters with another twinge of pain. Then, as a church clock in the neighborhood chimed the quarter hour, he steadied himself and set his teeth.

"No matter about that," he said, feverishly. "I'll manage somehow. Coombs, get me a taxi."

"Oh, you mustn't, Mr. Ramsey," Coombs protested. "You mustn't think of it. A thing of that kind might cripple you for life unless you give it immediate attention. There's a doctor's office right across the way here. At least, see what he has to say about it."

But what the doctor had to say was anything but encouraging to Ramsey's purpose. The injury was pronounced a severe wrench, in which some of the ligaments had been torn loose, and which, unless immediate treatment were given, might result in the most serious consequences.

"But I have an important engagement," expostulated Ramsey; "something that simply cannot be postponed. I'll be back here in half an hour."

He struggled to get up as he spoke, only to sink back with face convulsed and the sweat beading out across his forehead.

"I can't do it!" he exclaimed, despairingly.

Coombs leaned forward with an odd little glint in his eyes.

"Isn't it something that I might be able to attend to for you, sir?"

Ramsey glanced up sharply, hesitated a second, then, turning to the doctor, asked if Coombs and himself might be left alone for a moment.

But even after the doctor had stepped aside it seemed difficult for Ramsey to bring himself to speak. Finally, his face growing scarlet, he plunged into an explanation.

"Coombs," he said, "at one time in my life I was fool enough and cad enough to write some letters to a lady who had given me absolutely no encouragement to do so. They were harmless in intent, the mere outpourings of a lovesick boy, but so open to misconstruction that to have them go astray might result in terrible consequences."

He paused and drew his breath sharply between his teeth, whether from physical suffering or in reprobation of his folly it would have been hard to say.

"These letters were stolen by a maid," he went on, "who has finally agreed to return them for a price, and it was to meet her and close the bargain that I was bound tonight when I had to run into this. And the deuce of it is," he writhed, "that she has threatened, unless I appear promptly and pay over the sum demanded, she will dispose of the letters to—well, in another quarter."

"It's simple enough, then, isn't it, sir? All I've got to do is to see her in your place, and after explaining how you've been prevented from coming, tell her that she'll have to make a new appointment. If you'll just let me know where you were to meet her, and how to pick her out, I'll——"

"No," Ramsey broke in impatiently. "She's a suspicious creature. She'd think I was trying to play some trick on her, and be apt to disappear as she did before. I've been trying to get in touch with her for months, you see. She left the place where she was employed without notice, and, either through revenge or with the idea of realizing on them, she took these letters with her. Ever since I have been endeavoring to trace her. I have advertised and employed private detectives and followed all sorts of clues, but without success until this morning, when she sent me a letter arranging for a telephone conversation, in which she stated her terms.

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"NO," he repeated emphatically; "I can't lose this chance. I must have those letters. If I disappoint her or ask for a postponement, there's no telling what she'll do. I've got to go, I tell you. I've got to get there!"

"Let me do it for you," offered Coombs; "that is, if you're not afraid to trust me with the money."

Ramsey dismissed any idea of that sort with a contemptuous sniff. Coombs' honesty had been proved on too many occasions. Nevertheless, he shook his head.

"She insists on dealing with me in person. She stipulated those two conditions—that I come myself, and come alone."

"Even so, sir, it might be managed." Coombs' tone was almost urgently persuasive. "Half the time the people down at the apartment house don't know which of us is which; the hall boys are forever calling me Mr. Ramsey. It's the clothes and the general resemblance; and then, if I do say it myself, sir, I have caught quite your air. Where were you to meet this woman?" he added.

Ramsey gave a street number not more than a dozen blocks distant from where they were.

"It's a drug store," he explained, "and I am to wait for her beside a revolving bookcase which contains the circulating library."

"That's easy." Coombs displayed a mounting enthusiasm for the adventure. "I'll stand with my face toward the books, picking them out of the case and glancing them over until she shows up and comes toward me. Then she'll either do business with me or else I'll follow her and find where she hangs out. Trust me not to let her get away."

Ramsey pondered a moment. After all, it was not so wild an expedient as it sounded. He could remember little of the maid's appearance except that she was tall and light with gray eyes, and was it not fair to suppose that she remembered as little of him and might readily be deceived by the more than casual likeness of Coombs to himself? Faced by his disability and in the absence of any better suggestion, he yielded a reluctant consent and handed over the envelope containing the money.

"You must be careful, though, and make no mistake," he cautioned. "The woman's name is Sands—Ella Sands." And he added with this such identifying data as he could recall.

Coombs' attention however, seemed to be more concerned with the money in the envelope. He was running his thumb over the inclosed sheaf of bills as he counted them.

"Five thousand!" He glanced up. "Isn't that pretty steep, sir?"

"Of course, it's steep. If it was only myself that was threatened, I'd see this Sands woman——" He broke off abrutly as he noted a significant tightening of the lines about Coombs' mouth.

"But no haggling, mind," he adjured sternly. "If she turns over the letters, pay her and let her go. There are two of them, in my handwriting, and on my special note paper. You can't make a mistake. After all, it's a cheap enough price to pay for freedom from the sleepless nights and all the anxiety and worry that the things have been costing me.

"And now"—he glanced hurriedly at his watch—"on your way. You've just about time to get there."

"Oh, wait!" He called Coombs back as he started for the door. "It seems absurd, I know—a perfectly respectable drug store in a quiet, residential quarter, and in broad daylight—but it has struck me that the thing may possibly be a trap. There's a connection—I can't stop to explain it now—between this woman and the person I suspect of responsibility for those attacks against me. Better take this with you." He opened his hand to show a small automatic which he had drawn from his coat pocket.

But Coombs backed away with a quick shake of the hand.

"I'm safer without it, sir. They'd get me just the same if that's the idea. And having a weapon would make it look black for me in case of trouble. But there won't be any trouble," he laughed reassuringly. "I'll have my eyes peeled and my ears open, and at the first funny move it'll be 'safety first' for me and a quick get-away."

So with a gay wave of the hand and a promise to be back in less than no time, he started away, making such good speed that it still lacked ten minutes to the appointed hour when he arrived at his destination.

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THE drug store, Coombs found, was on a corner and occupied the ground floor of an apartment house. It had two entrances—one at the intersection of the two streets and one at the side. To enter at the front door it was necessary to go down two or three steps, while the side door was flush with the street level, which at this point followed a rather steep incline.

Sauntering in, he bought himself a cigar, and, having time to spare, occupied himself in taking note of his surroundings.

The bookcase holding the thumbed and limp volues of the circulating library was, he saw, on the right of the store and directly opposite the side entrance. He also observed that the windows being below the level of the sidewalk, it was impossible for passers-by to see what was going on inside.

He did not forget, though, to keep an eye on the clock, and as its hands approched seven he strolled carelessly back toward the bookcase and began idly glancing over the various titles. Presently he took a book from the shelves and apparently became absorbed in its contents.

As he stood there a woman, tall and fair, came in at the front door. She went directly to the counter where toilet articles were displayed and made one or two small purchases. She was perfectly quiet and composed as she waited for her parcels and her change. When these were handed to her she turned and walked back toward the circulating library.

Coombs did not turn or even lift his head as she approached behind him, but he was watching her every movement in a mirror on one of the showcases, with which he had carefully placed himself in line.

A minute or two later there was the thud of a body falling to the floor. A clerk and two customers ran forward. They thought the woman had fainted. But as they bent over her they saw the handle of a long, thin knife protruding from her chest and the blood making a widening circle on the floor. As they lifted her, it was plain that she was already dead. She had been stabbed to the heart.

In the momentary, startled hush, the sound of an automobile moving away from the side door throbbed across the stillness; then, as by magic, the store filled with an excited crowd of people.

"Hold that man!" the cigar clerk shouted as Coombs pushed toward an exit. "He was talking to her."

In an instant Coombs was seized, and although he made no effort to resist, held in a grip of iron by willing hands.

He looked dazed; his breath was coming rapidly.

"What happened?" he gasped. "What's the matter with her?"

"Guess you know!" criew a dozen voices. "It's murder!"

"But it can't be," he stammered. "I—— There was no one near us—just her and me. She started to go, and then I heard her fall."

The policeman on the beat came shouldering through the press, and with curt authority relieved the volunteer posse of their captive. He ran his hands over Coombs' person in a precautionary search for weapons, but finding none, stood listening to the excited babble of the clerks and spectators while he waited for the wagon. On its arrival with a squad of police and two plain-clothes men, he summed up the matter to his immediate superior in a single terse comment.

"Open-and-shut case, Sarge," he advised out of the corner of his mouth. "This is the guy, all right."

Then they took the prisoner away. At the station house the letters he had been commissioned to secure were found on him, and with the explanation he gave for his possession of them, Ramsey was naturally sent for.

Mystified at the summons, for he had as yet heard nothing of the tragedy, and had been impatiently awaiting the return of Coombs, Ramsey was still more taken aback when he came hobbling into the station on his crutches, to be conducted into the captain's office and there subjected to a grilling.

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FORTUNATELY, the story he told coincided in every essential detail with that previously related by Coombs. Fortnately, too, the representative of the district attorney's office who was questioning him happened to be a social acquaintance of his.

The latter, when he had taken Ramsey backward and forward over his movements of the day several times without shaking in any degree the straightforward nature of his answers, finally acquainted him with the true facts of the case and unbent from his role of inquisitor.

"I hope I don't need to tell you how delighted I am," he said, "that you have come through so clean. I was afraid when I first tackled this thing that you were pretty seriously involved and that we were in for a nasty scandal; but your story tallies perfectly with that of your valet, and is further confirmed by the fact that the dead woman had the exact sum you mention, five thousand dollars, in her bag. I must hold these letters, but I shall put them under seal, and unless the court insists upon it or unless the case shows some new angle, I see no reason why either the nature of them or the name of the person to whom they were addressed need ever be divulged."

Ramsey thanked him, and then asked eagerly if he might be allowed to see Coombs, and, consent being granted, the prisoner was brought in.

Coombs still seemed rather stunned by the disaster which had overwhelmed him, but insisted vehemently that his arrest was a terrible mistake.

"Why, what reason would I have, Mr. Ramsey? I'm not crazy. Why should I go and kill a woman that I never saw before and never expected to see again?"

"Of course you didn't do it," said Ramsey. "But," with frowning reflection, "who did? Think hard, Coombs; was there no one lurking about?"

Coombs shook his head. "No one that I saw," he said slowly. "It might be that some one slipped up very quickly and quietly; my attention was diverted for a moment. You see, she had just put the money in her bag and was snapping the catch and I was slipping the letters into my inside coat pocket. One of them caught against the pocket lining and bent over. I looked down as I straightened it out. In that instant the thing was done.

"As I say," he repeated, "I saw no one either before or after. But that is how it must have happened."

Ramsay caught up his theory eagerly.

"Yes," he agreed, "that is undoubtedly the explanation. And we'll prove it, too, before we are through. Don't let yourself get down-hearted for a minute, Coombs. I got you into this scrape and I'm going to get you out. You shall have the best counsel that I can secure, and not a stone will be left unturned to establish your complete innocence."

He turned to his friend from the district attorney's office. "Who is the best criminal lawyer to be had?" he asked.

"The best? Why, Heywood Achison, of course, if you can get him. He stands head and shoulders above any other man I could mention."

"No!" Ramsey's brow darkened as he demurred to the suggestion.

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BUT later in the cab as he mentally canvassed the five or six other names given him by the lawyer, struggling meanwhile against a growing despondency over the outlook, he caught himself dwelling on the brilliant capabilities of the advocate first proposed. And finally he tapped on the pane in front of him and gave his driver a new address.

The man turned about, swung over to the Grand Central viaduct, and after covering several blocks stopped in front of one of the apartment houses of upper Park avenue. Hardening his resolution, he allowed himself to be helped out and assisted into the building.

There he asked for Mr. Heywood Achison, and, learning that the latter was at home, sent up word that he wished to see him on a matter of urgent business. After a brief delay, a message was returned requesting him to come up.

On reaching the apartment Wallace found a servant waiting to inform him that Mr. Achison was busily engaged in his study at the moment, but he would be with him in a few minutes, and he was accordingly ushered into a small and very beautiful reception room.

The rich, dim light from concealed globes lay softly over its crimson dulled to violet, and its violets with the bloom of crimson on them. Pink and saffron petals were falling from a bowl of roses whose perfume filled the air. A great gray cat was curled up on an orchid cushion, and it sleepily opened its eyes and then closed them again as Ramsey wearily sat down.

Almost immediately a curtain was pushed aside and Achison stood in the doorway. He was a tall, imposing man, with a grace and quickness of movement which even his increasing flesh could not mar. His heavy, iron-gray hair was tossed back from a distinguished brow. His eyes had the cold, clear glint of steel, but his expression was uniformly benign.

For an imperceptible moment he paused, surveying Ramsey, who sat in the stronger light. From the slight curl of his lip, he might have been mockingly paraphrasing to himself that speech of Ahab's to Elijah: "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?"

"Ah. Ramsey." He spoke in that suave, mellifluous voice which had swayed many a jury, and which now was pointed with a faint surprise and hauteur.

Then, noticing his visitor's pallor and the effort it was costing him to rise, he added quickly:

"What is it? Have you had an accident?"

Ramsey sank back in his chair, easing his knee. The twingle occasioned by his attempt to get up caused him to scowl, and the scowl remained as he gazed at Achison without endeavoring in any degree to veil his hostility. He was too young to have acquired the art of which the lawyer was master, that of concealing his feelings.

"Yes," he said shortly; "I've managed to bang up my knee. That's an unimportant thing in itself, but it's had some pretty serious and widespread consequences. You may not have heard of the murder which occured this evening?"

"Murder?" repeated Achison in his deep tones. "Who was murdered?"

"Ella Sands. She was stabbed in a drug store over on the West Side, and my man, Coombs, has been arrested for it. He went to meet her in my stead, after I had slipped on a bit of banana peel." He made a disgusted grimace at the thought of his misadventure. "I was on my way to see her," he said now with sharp emphasis, "for reasons which you probably know and under circumstances of which you are doubtless aware."

There was a quick narrowing of Achison's eyes, but his poise was unshaken. He was invulnerable to surprise.

"Murdered!" he said again, and the astonishment in his tone was unfeigned, or would have seemed so to any one less skeptical of him than Ramsey. "And by—what did you say this man's name was? Ah, Coombs." He paused.

"So," he added reflectively, "Ella Sands is dead, killed by your valet." The inflection of the words, slight as it was, gave them the effect of a sinister innuendo. "How did this—er—Coombs happen to be in your employ? Tell me all the circumstances of the case, if you will be so good. And, by the way, you are looking very badly, Mr. Ramsey. Let me order you some Scotch. I still have a fair stock."

"Thanks, no." Wallace declined the offer with a negative gesture. Then as succinctly as possible he told his story.

Achison followed it with profound attention. "Very strange," he muttered abstractedly when Ramsey had finished. "Very strange. What is your theory regarding it?"

Ramsey leaned forward in his chair. The stronger light accentuated the lines of pain and anxiety in his face. His hair, damp with perspiration, streaked across his forehead.

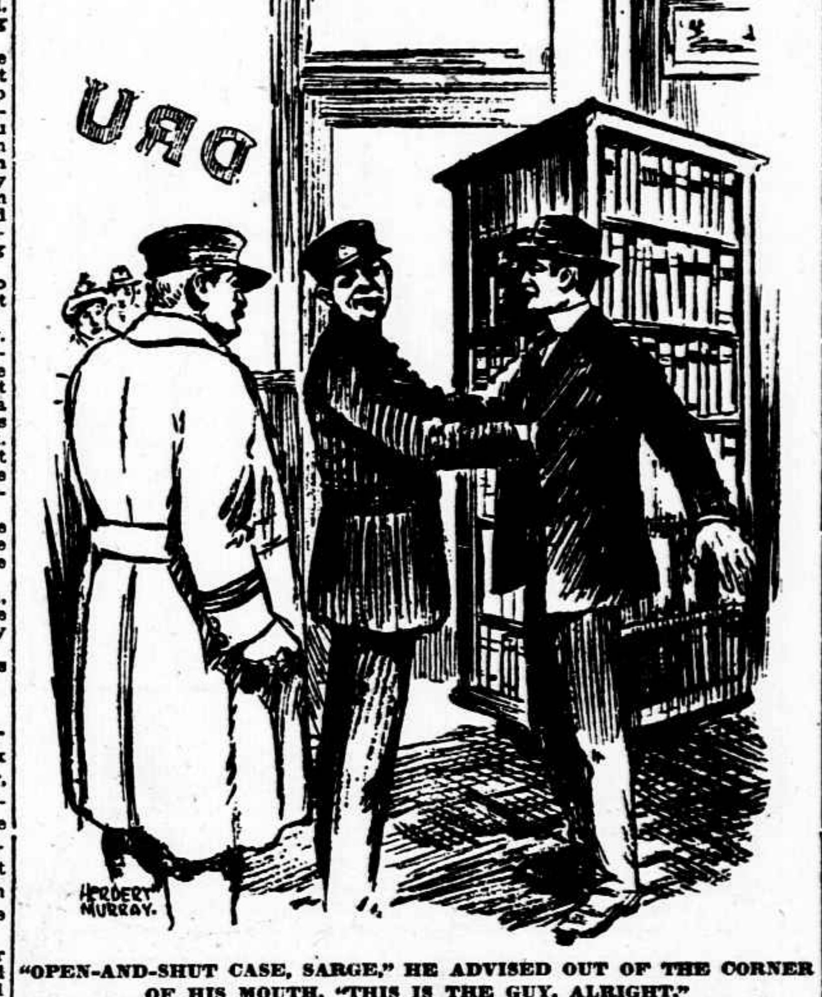
"I'll give you my theory," he said in a hard voice; "but there's a preface to come first. You may remember that in the fight to a finish that's on between you and me, I once had you fairly cornered, and you wiggled out by holding over me the possession of those letters in the hands of Ella Sands. For the sake of the lady involved, I was forced to refrain from exposing you."

* * * *

ACHISON had lifted the cat to his knee and was smoothing its fur with even, gentle strokes. His head was thrown back and he was looking at Ramsey disdainfully through half-closed eyes.

"Are you still nursing that absurd delusion that you once caught me in a questionable transaction?" he asked in bored scorn. "Me!" It was rather superb, the Caesarlike way in which he said it. He sighed and shook his head. "Such obsessions are dangerous. They should be resolutely excluded from the mind."

"I am well aware that my knowledge is dangerous," Ramsey answered significantly. His face was paler than ever; his eyes were burning. "I have had satisfying proof of that on several occasions. But it is not my peril that is bothering me now; it is that of Coombs. To any one conversant with the facts, it is ridiculous to believe that he is guilty of this murder. I know it, Mr. Achison, and so do you. Then who is guilty? Why, obviously some one who knew beforehand that Ella Sands was to deliver those letters to me at a certain time or place, and who seized upon it as an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—to get rid of Ella Sands, who probably knew too much, and at the same time fasten upon me the crime of murder. Until she encountered Coombs in the drug store she thought, and therefore the other persons thought, that I was to be there. It was a very shrewd scheme, but it miscarried because Coombs turned up—a man who had no earthly reason or excuse for killing the woman. The orders, however, were carried out as given, and hence the muddle."



"OPEN-AND-SHUT CASE, SARGE," HE ADVISED OUT OF THE CORNER OF HIS MOUTH, "THIS IS THE GUY, ALRIGHT."

He lifted his head slightly and bent his gaze upon Achison accusingly.

"Those letters were in your control, and when I heard from Ella Sands I knew that she was selling them with your knowledge and connivance. My letters!"

"I beg your pardon," corrected Achison punctiliously; "the lady's letters. I was fortunate enough to retrieve them from an unscrupulous maid, in whose power it lay to wreck the home and happiness of her blameless mistress solely through the medium of these cubbish and caddish effusions of your calf-love."

Ramsey's hands clenched until the nails bit into the flesh; his head dropped toward his chest, and his face was flushed with shame.

"Your condemnation is nothing beside my own," he said in a choked voice. "But my fault or folly is not the issue now. Neither is it material to inquire whether your motives in obtaining the letters were not less altruistic than you claim. You have not altered my opinion in regard to that. The point at present, however, is this: Those letters, if possible, have got to be kept out of the trial. Therefore, and also because I want Coombs to have the best obtainable counsel, I am asking you to take the case."

Achison was silent. Apparently he was engrossed in the study of a scarab ring upon his finger.

"I don't believe," Ramsey leaned forward, "you would particularly care to have your affiliation with the Sands woman disclosed, or the fact that you had turned over to her letters to be used in the levy of blackmail."

Achison glanced up from his contemplation of the ring and nodded.

"You are quite right," he admitted easily. "And yet," he continued half-musingly, "I have no real reason to feel ashamed of my conduct in the affair. It was the result of a chain of circumstances, and, to my mind, fully justified. You must understand, Ramsey," he squared back in his chair with an air of thoroughly unbosoming himself, "I have known Ella Sands for a long time, off and on. I once cleared her of a charge of robbery when she was little more than a girl, and she has ever since looked to me as an adviser, and has made me to some extent her confidant. It was due to this relation or quasi-relation between us that I was able to secure from her and hold in my keeping your letters; but only on condition that I should not destroy them and would deliver them to her on demand at any time she could convince me no injury would inure thereby to the lady involved.

"Poor thing!" He shook his head contemplatively. "She had a good many hard knocks from life, and I suppose they had taught her to drive a sharp bargain.

"At any rate," he resumed, "she came to me not long ago and insisted on a performance of the covenant. She told me that she was no longer young, and felt that she ought to establish herself in a settled position. Her brother, she said, a successful truck farmer, would buy more land and take her in as a partner if she could furnish the required capital. She thought then of the letters, and, knowing that you had been seeking to locate her, looked to you as a likely purchaser.

"I told her if she could give me proof that you were the person buying them she could have the letters; and accordingly the telephone conversation you had with her, in which the terms were arranged, was held from my office, with me listening on another instrument. Regarding it as a transaction beneficial to both sides," he smiled benevolently, "I gave her the letters without further question, and supposed that ended the matter."

"I can quite believe what you say!" Ramsey, who had been frowning throughout the recital, exclaimed bitterly. "Your story is worthy of you in every respect, and confirms me in my suspicion that you had a hand in the later developments."

Achison shrugged his shoulders with supreme indifference.

"I have no apologies to make," he said, his tone still satirically courteous. "Granting that my action in the premises was perhaps not strictly ethical, you must yet admit that it was human, very human.

* * * *

"HOWEVER," he broke off, speaking more briskly, "as you say, the question of importance at present is not what you think of me or I of you, but how to deal with this situation that has arisen. If the attitude of the district attorney's office is what you tell me, I have no doubt that the letters can be successfully suppressed. But as to securing an acquittal for this valet of yours, that is a horse of another color. The circumstantial evidence—the best evidence in the world, by the way, lay opinion to the contrary notwithstanding—seems all against him. The one thing in his favor is the apparent lack of motive."

"And isn't that enough?" demanded Ramsey. "Why should he kill a woman utterly unknown to him, and do it in such a manner that there was no chance of escape?"

"Why, indeed?" Achison echoed thoughtfully. "Unless his devotion to his employer was such that her action roused him to a homicidal fury, and that is scarcely plausible. However," he gave a wave of the hand as if to dismiss further speculation, "there's no use raising questions or trying to outline a defense until I have seen and talked to the man himself."

"You are going to take the case, then?" asked Ramsey.

Achison inclined his head, evidently starting to assent; but checked himself and paused at some suggestion which seemed to tickle his sense of humor. The corners of his wide, flexible mouth curled upward, and there was a flicker of malicious amusement in the glance he bent upon Ramsey.

"I will take the case," he said, "but only on one condition."

"What is that?" Ramsey drew back.

"That on the evening after I have succeeded in acquitting your man, you dine with me at my club. Oh, don't be alarmed!" he added ironically, as Ramsey stared at him, trying to fathom the reason back of so singular a proviso. "There will be no knock-out drops in the cocktails or cyanide in the salad. I will promise you safe conduct to and from the door, and guarantee you against any hidden trapdoors, concealed gunmen or other unusual accidents or incidents while inside."

Ramsay still hesitated, warily reflecting before he committed himself.

"I can hardly flatter myself," he said slowly, "that you wish merely to enjoy the pleasure of my society, but, since you make it a stipulation, for the sake of poor Coombs I agree. Otherwise——" He finished with an eloquent silence.

So, the next day when Ramsey visited the prisoner, he was able to bear to him the gratifying intelligence that he was to be represented by, as Coombs elatedly expressed it, "the best in the shop," and the latter thereupon settled down to await philosophically the outcome of the trial.

Following the regular routine of such matters, the case came up in general sessions about three months later; and as it progressed, Ramsey, who had heard much of the daring, ingenuity and audacity of Achison as a trial lawyer, found himself bitterly disappointed. To his mind, a raw novice from a night law school could hardly have made a sorrier showing.

This champion of a thousand hard-won criminal combats allowed the opposition to conduct the case practically as it pleased. He displayed but tepid interest in the selection of the jury, permitting the panel to be filled almost without a challenge; and thereafter, he sat back listlessly, hardly rousing himself to make even a pretense at cross-examining the various witnesses.

Again and again he let pass unheeded points to which he might well have taken exception. His slack inertness was the talk of the courtroom. Everywhere Ramsay moved—among the lawyers, court attaches, newspaper men and spectators—he heard but one expression, that Achison seemed deliberately to be throwing his case away.

The representative of the district attorney, on the other hand, was full of confidence and vigor. He evidently believed, with the policeman who had taken Coombs into custody, that it was an "open-and-shut case," in which conviction was a certainty. But he did not on that account remit any effort to nail home his contention in the minds of the jury.

He pictured for them through the testimony of the clerks and bystanders that scene in the drug store, with the full daylight of early evening on the streets outside, and the interior brightly illuminated by a score of electric globes. He made them see the man and woman standing apart, and within constant view of at least a dozen people—no possible place of concealment near them—the side door a good ten paces away. The inference that Coombs alone could have struck the blow that killed Ella Sands was inescapable, unless one chose to go back to the days of enchantment and believe that the assassin had come in a cloak of darkness.

The crime being established with the circumstances which pointed toward Coombs as its perpetrator, he cleverly skirted that lack of motive which was the weakest link in his chain, and which with all its efforts the prosecution had failed adequately to supply.

* * * *

UNABLE to prove a previous acquaintance between valet and victim, or to show any of the personal incitement to murder—jealousy, hatred or revenge—he fell back on robbery as the cause, and from the single circumstance of the $5,000 in the woman's bag built up a plausible argument. By innuendo, by suggestion and by direct statement, he painted Coombs as a crafty, scheming fellow, who, realising that he would undoubtedly be arrested if he made off with the money before paying the woman, had planned to get it by killing her, and then in the excitement effecting a quick disappearance.

It was a flimsy theory, but by his very persistence in presenting it he made it stick; yet all this while Achison did nothing to stay the tide of accusation, or to alter the unfavorable impression which one saw gathering in the minds of the jury against his client.

To Ramsey, dejectedly following the developments, it seemed that the prosecutor had iron-bound and riveted his case when he called to the stand an officer from Scotland Yard, in America, on another case, and through him positively identified Coombs, even to the fingerprints, as one William Orth, who had been arrested in London seven years before for burglary and had served a term in Dartmouth prison.

And then Achison arose. His listlessness and indifference were gone; but there was nothing aggressive in his manner, no suggestion of being hard-pressed. Serene, suave, smiling, he seemed simply to rise above the odds against him. He dominated the entire courtroom, judge, jury and spectators alike. As he commenced to speak there was a hush of absorbed attention. Even Ramsey paid a grudging tribute to the power of his magnetic personality.

With a careless wave of the hand he admitted and swept aside Coombs' criminal record. If the man was a burglar, so was the woman a blackmailer; and whereas the testimony would show that on leaving prison Coombs had determined to turn over a new leaf and had sedulously held to that resolve, she had met her end while in the very act of consummating felony.

But they were not there to question whether the defendant in his youth had committed a criminal error for which he had already paid the full penalty, or Ella Sands in her maturity had engaged upon the more despicable offense of blackmail. They were there to decide if it was the defendant's hand which had struck her down, and it was the task of the learned counsel on the other side to convince the jury of that fact beyond a reasonable doubt. On the prosecution rested the burden of proof. His client must be regarded as an innocent man until proved guilty.

"But I shall not stand on that provision of the law." He flung back his leonine head, and his voice rang out over the courtroom. "I shall show you beyond question that my client never struck the blow that killed Ella Sands."

Then he called Ramsey to the stand and, skillfully led by Achison, Ramsey told how Coombs at the risk of his own life had saved him at the time of the accident in the subway, and in their subsequent association had always shown himself steady, sober and honest as well as cheerful and efficient. He also showed how absolutely fortuitous and unforeseen were the circumstances which led to Coombs meeting the woman instead of himself. By an arrangement between counsel the nature of the letters which had figured in the transaction was not gone into; but naturally at this point the witness became a little nervous and embarrassed, and much of the good effect which his earlier testimony had created on the jury was lost.

The prosecutor noted his momentary lack of poise, and took advantage of it.

"You consider that this man saved your life, Mr. Ramsey?"

"I don't consider so. I know it."

"And naturally you would do a great deal for him in return?" There was no mistaking the sarcastic inference. The prosecutor glanced toward the jury, as if to say: "You see. This witness is under such a heavy obligation that he would swear to anything to help his rescuer."

But it almost seemed that Achison had been awaiting this interchange in order to score. Quick as a flash he came back.

"You would even have given him $5,000, if he had asked for it, Mr. Ramsey?"

"I certainly would," agreed Ramsey emphatically. "I have repeatedly tried to persuade him to accept money as a reward for the service he rendered me, but he always refused."

"Then there was no incentive for him to steal the amount you sent to this woman?"

"Not the slightest," said Wallace firmly. And the prosecutor, unable to counter, had to let him go.

* * * *

THEN Achison introduced into the case one of those surprise features for which he was famous. He called to the stand a solid, well dressed man of the substantial citizen type who proved to be the head of an important manufacturing concern. This witness stated that on the evening of the murder he had left his home about 7 o'clock, and, while walking up the hill toward the corner occupied by the drug store, had seen a man who was standing just outside the side entrance of the place turn suddenly, dash across the sidewalk, jump into a motor car standing at the curb and drive hurriedly away. A moment later he saw the crowd commencing to gather, and, when he reached the corner, learned that a murder had been committed.

Asked why he had not reported this before, he replied that he had attached no importance to the circumstance. He was told when he reached the corner that the murderer had been captured, and this was confirmed by the account in the next morning's papers. Besides, he was positive that the man had not come out of the drug store, but had been merely

(Continued on Sixth Page.)